Lina of Vaelinya

Eight Stories for the Brave of Heart

Dedication

For all who think, feel, and dream in ways the world sometimes misunderstands.

Epigraph

"The song was always yours. I just helped you hear it." — Finny

About Vaelinya

There is a place beyond the maps, beyond the noise, where the sky listens and the rivers hum in harmony. This is Vaelinya, a land woven from threads of music and quiet wonder.

Here, nothing is "too much" or "too strange." The way you notice the shimmer of light through leaves or hear patterns in the rustle of grass, these things matter here. They are part of the story, not distractions from it.

Vaelinya is a place where the smallest details can be the key to the greatest discoveries. Where differences are not just accepted but celebrated as part of the song that holds the world together.

For some, it's a dream. For others, it's home. And for Lina, it is where she learns that her voice, her true voice, belongs not in the shadows, but out in the open air.

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Lina and the Star That Forgot to Shine

The air on Vaelinya's hills was cool and smelled of night-blooming jasmine and damp earth. Lina lay on her back in the tall, soft grass, her arms folded behind her head as a pillow. The day had been loud and clattering, full of bright lights and sharp edges, and she had come to her favourite quiet place to let the silence smooth her out again. Above her, the sky was a vast, deep velvet blanket, and thousands of stars were flung across it like a careless handful of diamonds. They twinkled and blinked, pulsing with a bright, confident light, each one a tiny lantern in the endless dark.

Lina traced the familiar constellations with her finger, the Great Bear, the Hunter, the glittering belt of three. But tonight, her eyes were drawn to one spot, high above the sleeping silhouette of the tallest oak tree. There, nestled between two brilliant, shimmering stars, was a tiny patch of pure darkness. A little star that wasn't shining. It looked like a tiny, lonely hole in the fabric of the sky, a missing note in the magnificent symphony of the night. A quiet pang of sadness echoed in Lina's chest, a familiar feeling she recognized as her own.

"Why don't you shine, little star?" she whispered, her voice so soft it was almost part of the rustling leaves.

As if it had heard her from across an unimaginable distance, the star gave a faint, hesitant flicker. It was a shiver of light, a shy and apologetic pulse that lasted only a second before being swallowed by the darkness again. It looked less like a twinkle and more like a sigh. It was trying, Lina thought, but it just couldn't find the strength.

She closed her eyes and sang a quiet, searching song, the first one that came to her heart. It was a soft, slow lullaby her mother sometimes sang to her, a tune about sleepy rivers and dreaming mountains. As her gentle melody drifted up into the night, the star flickered again, a little brighter this time. It held its light for a few moments, a tiny bead of silver, before it sputtered and went out again, as if the effort was too much.

Lina fell silent. The star's struggle reminded her of her own day. It was the Festival of Lights Fair at school. She had worked for weeks on her project: a smooth, perfectly round river stone she had found and painted to look like a swirling, mysterious galaxy. It had deep blues, purples, and streaks of shimmering silver. She loved it. It was quiet and beautiful, just like the real night sky.

When her turn came, her voice tangled. The words she had practised felt clumsy and small. Then Leo unveiled his Vaelinyan project: a whisper-lantern grown from resin wood, its shell etched with glow-glyphs. As he breathed across the rim, the lantern answered in soft harmonics; the glyphs pulsed, and a ribbon of cold light spilled across the table like frost. Everyone gasped and clapped, faces silvered by that living glow. Lina slid her galaxy stone back into its velvet pouch. In a room of song and shining glyphs, her quiet little galaxy felt invisible, as small and dark as that forgotten star. "I get it," she said aloud, her voice a little stronger now, full of a new understanding. Her gaze was fixed on the tiny patch of darkness. "It's hard when everyone else is so bright. It makes you feel like your own light isn't enough."

Up in the sky, the star seemed to pulse in response, a slow, gentle beat of light that seemed to say, yes. That's it exactly.

A determined smile touched Lina's lips. She wasn't alone in her feeling, and neither was the star. "Maybe we can learn how to shine together," she suggested.

But as she took a breath to sing again, a gust of wind swept up the hill, rustling the leaves of the oak tree into a chorus of whispers. You're too small, the wind seemed to sigh. Your voice can't reach that far. No one can hear you. It was the same voice that lived in her own head sometimes, the one that told her to put her galaxy stone away.

Lina squeezed her eyes shut, pushing the whisper away. She thought of the star, so far away and so alone. It needed a friend more than it needed a perfect song.

She started to sing again, but this time it wasn't a borrowed lullaby. It was her own. It was a song about a girl who painted a galaxy on a stone, a galaxy that was quiet but held whole worlds inside it. She sang about how it felt to have your voice get stuck, and how it felt to be overlooked in a room full of noise. She sang about a grumpy wind that whispered doubts on a hillside, and about a tiny, brave star that was listening through the dark. The song was soft and a little shaky, but every word was true. It was the truest song she had ever sung.

And as her melody, full of her own story, drifted up into the vast, silent night, the star began to glow.

It wasn't the brilliant, flashing light of its neighbours. It was a gentle, steady glow, the colour of warm honey. It didn't flicker or compete for attention. It was a calm, breathing light, like a candle flame in a window on a dark night, a sign that someone was home. It didn't need to be the biggest or the brightest to be important. It was simply

itself, and its unique, quiet light made the whole sky feel a little warmer, a little less lonely.

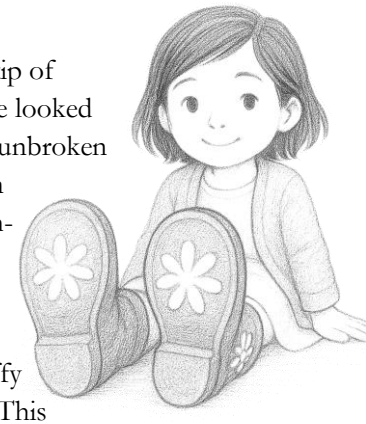
Later that night, tucked snugly into her bed, Lina could see the star through her window. It was still there, a tiny, soft speck of honey-coloured light. Her mum came in to kiss her forehead, her hand cool and comforting.

"The sky is beautiful tonight," Mum said softly. "Even the smallest light can show someone the way home."

Lina nodded, her eyelids heavy with sleep. "Maybe I don't have to shine the brightest all the time," she whispered, thinking of her quiet galaxy stone and the steady little star.

Her mum smiled, smoothing Lina's hair back from her forehead. "Your light is like that star's, you know. Quiet and kind and wonderful you. You don't ever have to shine like anyone else. Just shine your way."

Lina and the Cloud That Cries



It started with a drip. Just one. It landed on the tip of Lina's nose, as soft and unexpected as a sigh. She looked up, puzzled. The sky above Vaelinya was a vast, unbroken canvas of pale, peaceful blue. There were no rain clouds building on the horizon, no hint of a coming storm. There was only the sun, warm on her shoulders, and one small, lonely cloud.

It wasn't a normal cloud. It wasn't white and puffy like the others that drifted lazily in the high sky. This one was the colour of a dove's wing, a soft, troubled grey and it trembled with a faint, continuous quiver. It was floating impossibly low to the ground, hovering just above the tops of the whisper grass like a lost sheep that had forgotten how to find its flock, or a boat that had forgotten how to rise on the tide. And as Lina watched, another perfect, silent drop fell from its underside. It was weeping.

A feeling of gentle empathy, a familiar tug in her own heart, drew Lina closer. She held out her hand, palm up, a silent offering. The cloud seemed to notice her. It drifted nearer, its edges quivering like a frightened kitten seeking comfort. Another drip, warm and surprisingly heavy, landed perfectly in the centre of her palm. It felt less like rain and more like a tear.

"What's wrong?" she whispered, her voice barely louder than the rustle of the grass.

The cloud pulsed, its grey deepening for a moment. It couldn't speak in words, of course, but Vaelinya had its own ways of communicating. A faint, cool breeze, smelling of damp earth and something ancient,

wrapped around her, answering her question not with sounds, but with feelings.

Lonely. The feeling was a vast, empty space, a quiet ache of being separated. Full. This was a feeling of pressure, of being filled to the brim with unspoken thoughts, unshed tears, and unseen storms. Heavy. It was the weight of carrying all that fullness, a burden that pulled it down from the sky, tethering it to the earth.

Lina knew that feeling. She knew it intimately. She thought of all the times she'd felt that way herself, when a quiet sadness would settle over her for no reason she could name. Days when her heart felt too full of things she couldn't explain, a tangled knot of emotions that had no words. Times when the tears would well up in her eyes even though nothing was terribly wrong. It was just… too much. It was the quiet weight of being alive.

She looked up at the trembling grey mass above her. "It's okay," she said gently, her voice full of a sudden, clear understanding. "You can cry. You don't have to hold it all in. I'll stay right here with you."

As if her words were the permission it had been waiting for, the cloud lowered itself further, until its misty tendrils were just above her head, close enough to touch. And then it began to rain properly. It wasn't a cold, harsh storm. It was a gentle, steady weeping. The drops were warm and slow, and they smelled of things Lina had never known rain could smell of—the faint salt of the distant sea, the dry dust of forgotten attics, and the faint, melancholic melody of old, lost songs. It was the most sorrowful, and the most beautiful, rain she had ever felt.

Lina didn't run for cover. She didn't even put up her hood. She sat down cross-legged in the grass, tilted her face up to the gentle show-

er, and let herself get wet. She let the cloud's sadness wash over her, feeling its immense relief in every drop.

She began to hum, a soft, rambling tune with no beginning and no end. It was a song of companionship, a quiet melody that said, you are not alone in this.

The cloud responded. Its weeping didn't stop, but it changed. The steady rhythm of the raindrops became a little lighter, and the cloud's grey edges began to glow with a soft, internal luminescence, like it was finally exhaling a breath it had been holding for ages. The rain slowed, the drops becoming fewer and farther between, until it was just a gentle mist.

Then, the cloud began to rise. It floated upwards, shedding its weight, becoming lighter and less dense as it ascended back toward its home in the sky. When it was high above her, it shivered one last, conclusive time. But this final shiver didn't release thunder or lightning. It burst, silently, with pure colour.

A soft, shimmering trail of golden mist, as bright and warm as liquid sunlight, unspooled from the cloud's centre. It drifted down, not like rain, but like a ribbon unfurling in a slow, graceful spiral. It drifted directly towards Lina. She watched, mesmerized, as it reached her. It didn't soak her or touch her as a physical thing. Instead, it wrapped around her shoulders like a warm, weightless scarf, lingered for a moment with a feeling of immense gratitude, and then faded into nothing.

Above her, the small cloud, now a soft, ordinary white, drifted away and joined its brethren in the vast, peaceful blue. The sky was as it had been before.

But Lina felt different. The grass was wet, her hair was damp, but she felt inexplicably lighter — as if something heavy had been lifted from her own shoulders, a quiet sadness she hadn't even known she was carrying.

Later that night, as her mum was helping her hang up her damp jacket, she held it up. "Did you get caught in the rain?"

Lina shook her head, a small, secret smile playing on her lips. "Not really."

"A storm, then?"

"No," Lina said, looking out the window at the now star-filled sky. "Just a cloud who really needed a good cry."

Her mum paused, then smiled that soft, knowing smile Lina loved so much. She leaned in and kissed her daughter's forehead. "We all do, sometimes, my love."

Lina nodded, her heart feeling clear and calm as the sky outside. "Next time," she whispered, mostly to herself, "maybe I'll cry with it."

Lina and the Sleeping Tree

Lina had walked this way a hundred times before. It was her secret path, a winding trail that led to a sun-dappled clearing perfect for quiet thinking. She knew its every landmark by heart. She passed the cluster of scarlet-capped mushrooms that hummed with a low, contented thrum when you gently touched their tops. She skipped past the large, flat stone with a perfectly round hole worn through its centre, a hole that, if you peeked through it at just the right angle, made the world look like it was giving you a conspiratorial wink. But today, where the path should have opened into the clearing, something new was there.

A tree. It was a word too small for what stood before her. This was a titan, a giant from a forgotten age. Its trunk was immense, wider than her house, with bark of a pale, luminous silver that seemed to drink the sunlight. Its colossal branches didn't just reach for the sky; they curled and twisted back in on themselves, wrapping around the main trunk like ancient arms hugging a profound secret. It was an impossible presence. It shouldn't have fit in the narrow space between the sheer cliffs. Yesterday, this space had been empty.

But it was there now. And it was sleeping.

She could feel it in a way she couldn't explain. The entire forest seemed to be holding its breath around the great tree. It breathed, but not with air. It was a slow, deep inhalation and exhalation of time itself. Patches of thick, velvety moss on its trunk pulsed with a slow, rhythmic light, like a great, slumbering heart. From one of the lower

branches, a thick, woody vine curved down, its end swaying gently back and forth in the completely still air.

Drawn by a curiosity that was stronger than her caution, Lina stepped closer. The ground at its base was soft, carpeted in a moss that muffled her footsteps. “Hello?” she whispered, the sound swallowed immediately by the tree’s immense presence.

The tree said nothing, but the air around it changed. It thickened, growing warm and heavy, like stepping into a sun-heated pool of water. Her own thoughts, usually quick and darting, felt slower, calmer, as if they too were being lulled toward sleep. A single leaf, shaped like an open hand and the colour of pale gold, detached from a high branch. It didn't flutter or spin; it descended in a slow, deliberate spiral and landed perfectly in her outstretched palm. It was warm to touch.

A whisper brushed against her ear, clear as a chime, though it made no sound. Don’t wake it. Not yet.

Lina spun around, startled. There was no one there. The whisper grass was still; the winking stone was silent. Then the feeling came again, but this time it bloomed from inside her own chest, a thought that was not her own. Dreaming.

With a sense of reverence, Lina placed her hand flat against the silver trunk. The bark was smooth as worn stone, and a deep, low thrum passed from it into her palm, up her arm, and settled in her heart. It wasn't a sound; it was a memory.

The world around her dissolved. She saw a forest, but it was younger, wilder. At the base of this very same tree, a small child was curled, weeping. It was a girl, dressed in a simple tunic with a cloak of

stitched-together rabbit pelts draped over her small, shaking shoulders. Her face was smudged with dirt and tears, and her eyes, when she looked up, were dark and wide like chips of obsidian reflecting the stars. Lina felt the child's raw fear, her utter loneliness. But she also felt the tree's presence wrap around the girl like a protective embrace, its silent strength a promise of sanctuary. It was not Lina's memory. It was someone else's, someone from long, long before her time.

Lina blinked, and the vision faded, leaving her standing in the quiet sunlight, her hand still pressed against the ancient bark. But now she understood. The tree wasn't just sleeping. It was a guardian. It was a library of whispers, a sanctuary for forgotten feelings. It was holding onto stories, to dreams, to lost children who needed a safe place to rest. It kept them safe within its great, slumbering heart.

She slid down to sit at the base of the tree, her back resting against the solid trunk. She didn't speak. She didn't sing. She just listened, offering her quiet presence as a gift.

After a long while, as she sat in the deep, peaceful silence, her own memories began to rise to the surface, bubbling up like springs. They were tiny, precious things she hadn't thought of in years: the feeling of pure joy as she laughed, head thrown back, in a sudden summer downpour; the sharp, metallic taste of her favourite silver spoon that she'd dropped and lost in the tall grass; the strange sense of freedom when her shoe got stuck in the mud and she decided to leave it behind, pretending it was the start of a grand adventure.

The tree seemed to remember them with her. It didn't judge or question. It simply held them, adding her small, important stories to its vast, dreaming collection. It didn't ask for anything. It only wanted company in its long, slow vigil.

Lina rested against its bark until the light began to shift, the sun slanting low and turning the sky to a soft, rose-gold. A sense of peace settled over her, deep and profound. She stood, brushing the moss from her clothes, and placed her palm on the trunk one last time. "Sleep well," she whispered.

The tree didn't answer with a voice or a vision. But at her feet, right where she had been sitting, a single flower pushed its way up through the moss. It unfurled its petals in a matter of seconds—a bloom of the deepest, most velvety blue, with a dusting of silver pollen at its centre that glowed with a soft light of its own. It was a flower she had never seen before, a gift from a dream.

Later that night, her mum noticed the impossible flower tucked carefully into Lina's hair as she read a book.

"My goodness, where did you find that?" Mum asked, her voice full of wonder.

Lina looked up, her eyes still holding the deep peace of the forest. "In a dream," she said simply.

Her mum paused, tilting her head. "A waking dream?"

Lina smiled, a slow, serene smile that held the memory of ancient silver bark and a thrumming heartbeat. "The best kind."

Lina and the Whispering Cave

Lina had never been this far from home. The rule was simple, repeated every morning in her mother's calm, firm voice: "Stay inside the shimmer, Lina. Don't wander." The shimmer was a perimeter of softly humming bubble-lights that encircled their small settlement, casting a safe, predictable glow. Inside the shimmer, the ground was cleared, and the plants were familiar.

But the shimmer was boring. It was a cage made of safety. The shimmer didn't have flowers with deep blue petals that pulsed with a soft light when you laughed near them. It didn't have the peculiar joy of watching a flock of jewel-feathered birds who sang their songs backwards, starting with a final, triumphant note and ending on a quiet, hopeful inhale.

And the shimmer did not have a cave that whispered your name.

Lina stared at it now, her heart a fluttering bird in her chest. It was nestled in the side of a large, moss-covered hill a short distance beyond the bubble-lights. The hill itself seemed alive, rising and falling in a slow, deep rhythm, as if it were breathing in its sleep. The cave mouth was a perfect, dark circle, a pupil in the green hillside. It was utterly, profoundly quiet. It was a silence so deep it felt like a sound inside itself. The usual rustling of the listening trees had ceased. The constant, high-pitched buzz of the tiny, winged creatures in the air had stopped. Even the sky above, a canvas of pale green and swirling violet, seemed to be holding its breath.

She took one tentative step off the cleared path and onto the wild, springy moss. A soft sound drifted out from the darkness, a sound like wind rustling through ancient, dry leaves. Linaaa…

She froze, every muscle tensed. That was her name. There was no mistaking it. But no one else was here. Her mother was back at the village, sorting herbs and jars. The other children were in their lessons. She was completely alone.

Her survival instincts, drilled into her since she was born, screamed at her. Run. Get back to the camp. Back to Mum and the predictable hum of the bubble-lights and the not-scary, not-strange shimmer. Her feet twitched, ready to bolt.

But then, a different thought took root. The cave hadn't shouted at her. It hadn't growled or roared. It had whispered. It had sounded… lonely. Like a secret that had been waiting too long to be told.

Lina took a shaky breath, the strange, clean, cold scent filling her lungs. She remembered what Mum had told her just that morning, after she'd admitted to being scared of the planet's long, shadowy nights. "Being brave doesn't mean you're not scared, my love," Mum had said, her hands gently framing Lina's face. "It just means you've decided that something else is more important than the fear."

Lina looked at the dark, waiting cave. Curiosity. Kindness. Those things felt more important right now. So, she took another step. And then another.

The air grew cooler as she approached the entrance. Crossing the threshold was like stepping into another world. It wasn't dark inside, not exactly. The curving walls glowed with a soft, pale green light, the exact shade of the night-lanterns they kept for storms, a colour that

was meant to be calming. The light wasn't steady; it pulsed gently, in time with the slow breathing of the hill outside, like she was standing inside the chamber of a great, sleeping heart. The air smelled of damp, rich earth, fallen leaves, and something else… something clean and cold and vast, like starlight.

"Hello?" Lina whispered, her voice sounding small and fragile in the immense, quiet space.

The cave answered with a cascade of soft echoes, her own word coming back to her in gentle layers: lo… lo… lo…

She walked deeper in. Her boots made soft, crunching sounds on the mossy floor. Something tickled her cheek, and she flinched, but it was only a single, shimmering silver thread of light, drifting down from the high ceiling like a strand of spiderweb. It didn't sting or burn. It hummed against her skin for a moment with a pleasant, low vibration, and then dissolved.

Then the cave whispered again, not from the entrance this time, but from all around her, a thought that formed directly in her mind. Not afraid?

Lina stopped, her hand resting on a glowing green wall that felt smooth and cool as river stone. "I am afraid," she admitted, her voice wobbling just a bit. "But… I also want to know who you are."

For a long moment, there was only the slow, pulsing light and the scent of starlight. Then, like a sigh of wind made visible, the soft green light on the walls began to move. It flowed like water, streams of luminescence gathering in the centre of the cave, swirling and coalescing. In front of her, the light solidified into a small, curled shape, glowing brightly.

It was a creature made of woven light and translucent, veined leaves. Its body was no bigger than her two hands held together, and its enormous, luminous eyes were the colour of the deep violet sky outside. From its back sprouted wings that weren't made of feather or membrane, but flickered like gentle, contained candle flames.

Lonely, the creature whispered into her mind. The feeling that came with the word was not sad or pitiful, just a vast, ancient solitude. Not bad. Just… waiting.

Lina felt the knot of fear in her stomach finally melt away, replaced by a wave of pure, undiluted wonder. She took a step closer. "Are you… the cave?"

The creature blinked its slow, starlit eyes. Yes.

"You were calling me?" she asked, a sense of privilege washing over her.

You heard, the creature explained. Others come to the edge. They feel the silence. But they do not listen. Their minds are too loud.

"I hear lots of things," Lina said quietly. "Sometimes even things I'm not supposed to."

A feeling of gentle amusement flowed from the creature. Good. That means you can stay. A little while.

So, Lina sat down on the soft, mossy floor of the cave that was not a cave, but a friend. The glowing creature uncurled and drifted over to settle beside her, its flickering wings casting warm, dancing shadows. And together, in the heart of the breathing hill, they simply listened to the quiet.

Later that night, her mother found her sitting just outside the shimmer line, her knees hugged to her chest, her face calm and her eyes dreamy.

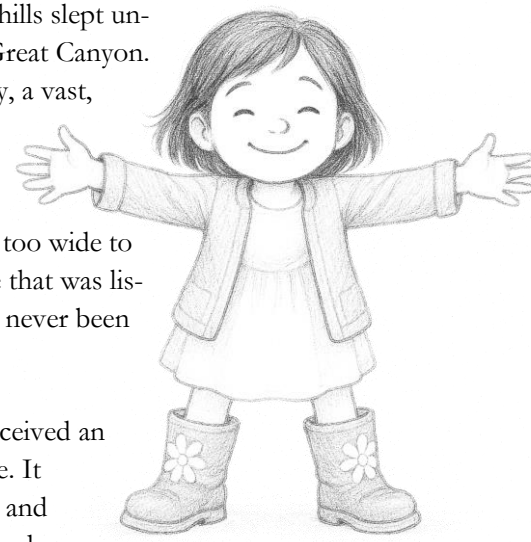
"Lina. Where were you?" Mum asked, her voice a mixture of gentle relief and lingering worry.

Lina looked up, her face illuminated by the pulsing bubble-lights. "I made a friend," she said. "In the whispering cave."

Mum's gaze flickered toward the dark, mossy hill in the distance, then back to her daughter's serene face. A hundred questions seemed to cross her mind, but she only asked one. "Was it scary?"

Lina smiled, a slow, sure smile that held the memory of green light and starlight and a long, long wait finally coming to an end. "Yes," she said honestly. "But only at first."

Lina and the Bridge That Sang Back



In the heart of Vaelinya, where the hills slept under blankets of silver mist, lay the Great Canyon. It was a place of silence and mystery, a vast, beautiful emptiness that split the world in two. The adults of Vaelinya spoke of it with a respectful hush, a wound in the earth too wide to be healed. But Lina saw it as a place that was listening, waiting for a question it had never been asked.

Then, one morning, the question received an answer. The bridge was simply there. It hadn't been there when the sun set, and now it was, as if it had grown from a dream and solidified in the dawn light. It was made of a substance that looked like spun glass, and it glowed from within with a soft, internal light like a captured moonbeam. It stretched elegantly over the canyon, arching from one familiar cliff edge to a far side that looked identical—a destination of nothing, a path from nowhere.

The townsfolk gathered at a safe distance, murmuring. They saw its impossible beauty but also its unnerving strangeness. It was too perfect, too ethereal. No one dared to step on it. They didn't even know if it was solid. After a day of whispers and warnings, they returned to their routines, leaving the bridge to its silent, glowing vigil.

But Lina was different. She wasn't afraid. She was curious. She would sit for hours near the cliff's edge, watching the way the bridge's light shifted from pearly white to soft lavender as the clouds drifted by. One afternoon, humming a tune absently to herself, she noticed

something extraordinary. The bridge answered. A soft, clear harmonic, an echo of her own note, shimmered back to her through the air. It was a sound like tiny, crystalline bells.

She hummed again, a little louder. The bridge responded with a chord, its light pulsing in perfect time. It was a conversation.

That morning, a new resolve settled in Lina's heart. She brought her little wooden recorder, its surface worn smooth by her fingers. She stood at the very edge of the canyon, the cool, misty air kissing her cheeks, and played a tune her mum had taught her. It was a simple melody, slow and rising, a song that felt like the sun climbing over the hills.

The bridge listened. Then, it sang back. Its entire length pulsed with a warm, golden light, and the air filled with a humming resonance that vibrated deep in Lina's chest. The sound wasn't just an echo anymore; it was an orchestra of light and harmony, building on her simple tune. With a deep breath that was half fear and half wonder, Lina took a step onto the glowing glass.

It held. The surface was warm beneath her worn boots, and she felt the bridge's hum not just in her ears, but through the soles of her feet. She played another note on her recorder, a clear, high F-sharp. A panel of glass ahead of her lit up with a brilliant emerald green, and she took another step onto it. One note, one footstep. Another note, another step.

With each movement forward, the duet grew more complex. The bridge wasn't just responding; it felt like it was learning, anticipating, collaborating. It took her simple melody and wrapped it in intricate counter-melodies and warm bass undertones. It felt less like she was crossing a structure and more like she was walking through the heart

of a living song. The silver mist below churned slowly, and for a moment, Lina thought she saw shimmering, fish-like shapes swimming in its depths.

Halfway across, suspended between the world she knew and the world she couldn't see, she stopped. The bridge hummed a low, expectant note, holding its breath with her. The silence was profound. Her own world was far behind her, and the other side was still just an empty cliff. This was the centre of the mystery, the heart of the question.

Lina closed her eyes. She lowered her recorder. The song the bridge needed now wasn't one she had been taught. It was one this journey had created inside her. She opened her mouth and sang.

There were no words. It was a melody born of the glowing glass, the swirling mist, and the brave, steady beat of her own heart. It was a song of trust. It was gentle and curious, like the feeling of discovering a hidden place where no one had ever set foot. It was a song that said, I see you. I am not afraid. Let us meet here, in the middle.

When she opened her eyes, the far side of the canyon was different. It wasn't a blank mirror of the cliff she had left. It was new. As if her song had been the final ingredient, a path had bloomed into existence, winding away from the cliff's edge. It was paved not with stone, but with softly glowing moss. Alongside it grew flowers she had never seen before, with petals like spun moonlight that dripped tiny beads of dew-light onto the ground. And in the distance, among strange, willowy trees, she saw something moving—something graceful and gentle.

She took the last few steps, her heart full and her legs shaking slightly, and stepped off the bridge onto the glowing moss of the new path.

Behind her, the bridge pulsed one final, brilliant time, a wave of rainbow light sweeping from one end to the other. A chord of perfect, final harmony rang through the air, and in her mind, she heard a voice that was not a voice, clear as a bell. Thank you.

And then, it vanished. Not with a crash, but by dissolving into a billion tiny motes of light that rained down into the silver mist below and disappeared. Behind her, there was only empty sky. Ahead, the new. Lina smiled. Vaelinya had listened to her again. And this time, it was answering in a language the whole world could see.

Later that night, her mum tucked her into her bed. She brushed a stray curl from Lina's forehead.

"You look… taller," Mum said, her smile soft and knowing. It wasn't about height; it was about the way Lina held herself, a quiet new confidence in her eyes.

"I crossed something," Lina murmured, her voice sleepy but sure.

Mum blinked. "A line on the ground?"

"No. A bridge. It was made of light. It sang."

Her mum paused, her hand resting on the bed's edge. "What did it sing about?"

Lina looked up at the ceiling, which was now pulsing with soft constellations of nightlights. She thought of the journey, the swirling mist, and the song that had come from her own heart. "Me," she whispered.

Her mum didn't speak for a long moment, her eyes full of a deep, proud understanding. Then she leaned in and kissed Lina's forehead. "When the world sings back to you, Lina," she said softly, "it means it's finally understood your song. It means it's listening."

Lina nodded, her eyes drifting closed. "It listened. And now it's changing."

Lina and the Mirror Pool

The creature was a delightful puzzle. It looked like a scurry-fluff, with a body made of soft, dandelion-like fluff and far too many ears that swivelled independently, but it moved with the hopping gait of something that had misplaced most of its legs. Lina had been trying to sketch it in her notebook when it had given a flick of its fluff-tail and bounced away into a part of the woods she rarely explored. Her curiosity, as always, was a stronger guide than her sense of direction. She followed, and the creature led her on a merry chase before disappearing entirely into a thicket of bell-vines. But its disappearance had served a purpose. It had led her here.

Before her lay a pool of water, so perfectly still and round it looked like a giant silver coin that had been pressed into the soft green moss by a careless god. The air around it was hushed, reverent. No insects buzzed above its surface; no breeze dared to ripple its face. It was a place of deep, ancient stillness, a mirror left behind by the sky.

Drawn by its profound quiet, Lina knelt at its edge. The reflection was flawless. She could see the impossible blue of the Vaelinyan sky, the intricate branches of the trees overhead, and even a lazy jelly-bird—a creature that looked like a floating jellyfish trailing ribbons of light—drifting high above. And there, in the centre of it all, was her own face, framed by its familiar messy curls.

She smiled, pleased with the secret she'd found. But something was wrong. Her own lips had curved upwards, but the face in the water remained still, its expression serious and watchful.

Lina's smile faltered. She tilted her head, a question in her eyes. The girl in the pool didn't move. Her reflection just stared back, its gaze steady and unnervingly direct. Lina blinked once, twice, a flicker of unease fluttering in her chest. And then the girl in the pool smiled. It was a slow, knowing smile that didn't match her own nervous expression at all.

"I know you," the reflection said, its voice not an echo, but a clear, resonant sound that seemed to rise from the depths of the water.

Lina stumbled back, her heart thumping against her ribs. She scrambled to her feet, staring down at the impossible image. "You're… you're not me."

The reflection stood up, its form shimmering but solid within the watery world of the pool. It was her, no doubt about it. The same wild curls, the same sprinkle of freckles across her nose, the same deep, thoughtful eyes. But this version of her stood differently. Her shoulders were back; her chin was high. She looked brighter somehow, bolder, as if the light she held inside was turned all the way up.

"I am you, you that doesn't hide," said the pool-girl, her voice gentle but firm. "I'm you, you who answers the teacher's question even when you're not sure you're right. The one who climbs the tallest branch of the singing tree just to see how the world looks from up there. I'm the one who sings her song out loud, even if it's wobbly."

A flush crept up Lina's neck. She thought of all the times she'd known an answer but stayed quiet, afraid of being wrong. She thought of the tall, inviting branches she'd only ever admired from the ground. "I can't do those things," Lina said, her own voice sounding small and thin in the quiet woods. "I try, but my voice gets stuck. My feet get scared."

"Not yet," the reflection corrected softly. "You don't do them yet. But you did once. And I remember how. I think that's why you came to find me today."

Lina crept closer to the edge of the pool again, mesmerized. "How can I remember something I've never done?"

"But you have," the pool-girl insisted. "You did, once. A long time ago. Before the world taught you that being quiet was safer than being loud. Before you learned that being wrong felt worse than being invisible. That memory is still in you. It's just… sleeping."

Lina frowned, her brow furrowed in concentration. She tried to remember a time she felt that brave, but the memories were hazy, like the reflection itself. "But I don't feel brave," she confessed in a whisper. "Right now, I mostly feel like running away."

The pool-girl knelt, bringing her face level with Lina's, their noses almost touching at the water's invisible barrier. Her eyes were full of a powerful kindness. "Feelings aren't facts, Lina," she said, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "They're just weather. They pass. Sometimes you don't have the feeling of bravery to help you. Sometimes you just must choose the brave action first. You take the step. You speak the word. You sing the note. And you let the brave feeling catch up to you after. It almost always does."

Lina stared at the girl who was and was not her. This girl believed in her. With a shaky hand, Lina reached down toward the water's surface, wanting to feel if this was real. The reflection mirrored her exactly, her own shimmering hand rising to meet hers from below.

Their fingertips touched the surface at the exact same moment.

And then—splash!

It wasn't a normal splash. A jolt of cool, clean energy, like gentle electricity, shot up Lina's arm. The reflection didn't just break apart into ripples; it shattered into a thousand motes of shimmering, silver light. For a breathtaking second, the light swirled in the water like a tiny galaxy before spiralling inwards and rushing back into her own true reflection. The ripples spread out, touched the mossy edges of the pool, and vanished.

When the water settled again, only Lina's real face stared back at her. But something was profoundly different. Her eyes looked a little taller from the inside. Her gaze felt a little steadier. There was a quiet hum of readiness in her chest. She was still just Lina, but she felt more like herself than she had a moment ago.

Later that night, as her mum tucked her in, she asked her usual question. "Did you find anything interesting in Vaelinya today?"

Lina nodded from under her warm blankets. "I found someone. She reminded me of me."

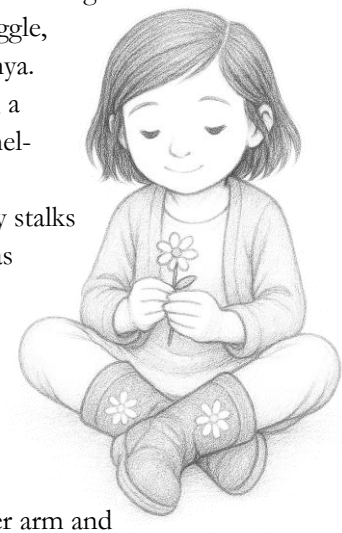
Her mum smiled, smoothing her hair. "That's a very good kind of someone to find."

"She was loud," Lina whispered, her voice getting sleepy. "And strong."

"Maybe you are, too," Mum said gently.

"Maybe," Lina whispered back, her eyes closing. But tonight, the word didn't feel like a doubt. It felt like a promise.

Lina and the Maze That Remembers



The day had started with a chase. A flutter-moth, with wings like stained glass and a flight path like a drunken giggle, had led Lina away from the familiar paths of Vaelinya. She'd been hoping it might lead her to a song-fruit, a rare, bell-shaped gourd that chimed with a secret melody when the wind was just right. She followed it through a grove of whisper grass, whose tall, silvery stalks hissed with gentle secrets as she passed. But then, as quickly as it had appeared, the moth dissolved into a flicker of light and vanished. The whisper grass parted, and Lina found herself standing somewhere new.

She stood before a wall. It wasn't a wall of brick or wood, but one woven from living vines, thick as her arm and shimmering with a faint, dewy light. Interspersed among the vines were large, smooth stones of a pale silver that seemed to absorb the daylight and hold it within. It was a maze. It hadn't been there yesterday. Lina was sure of it. It probably hadn't even been there an hour ago. It felt as if it had pushed its way up from the sleeping earth while she was busy with the moth. The entrance was a perfect archway, and the air within it pulsed with a soft, inviting glow. An invitation.

Lina hesitated; her boots rooted to the spot. A part of her, the sensible part that listened to adults, tugged at her sleeve. Mazes were for getting lost in.

"Not today," she whispered to the entrance, more to convince herself than the maze.

As if in reply, the vines rustled gently, a sound like a soft, collective sigh. But you already began, they seemed to say. The moment you chose to follow.

And she knew it was true. The journey hadn't started here, at this archway. It had started with that restless feeling, the gentle pull toward something unknown that had made her follow the moth in the first place. Her feet, seemingly with a mind of their own, moved forward, carrying her over the threshold and into the labyrinth.

Inside, the maze was quiet. Not an empty, lonely quiet, but a deep, listening silence. The air was still and cool, and the light from the silver stones cast soft, shadowless patterns on the ground. She turned left, then right, following an instinct she couldn't name. There were no signs, no tricks, no dead ends. It felt less like a puzzle and more like a pilgrimage.

Every turn brought a memory, so vivid it was almost real. Around one corner, lying perfectly in the centre of the path, was a single, iridescent blue feather. Her breath caught in her throat. It was from Flicker, her little pet bird who had flown away one spring morning two years ago. She picked it up, and for a heart-stopping moment, she could feel his tiny weight in her palm and hear his cheerful, chirping song. It was a memory tinged with the sweet ache of loss, and the maze held the feeling gently, without judgment.

She continued, and a new sensation drifted towards her. It was a tune, a simple, looping melody her dad used to hum under his breath when he was fixing things around the house. It was the sound of safety, of quiet, capable love, a tune that meant everything was going to be alright.

Another turn brought a smell so powerful it made her stop and close her eyes. It was the scent of her own home on a rainy Sunday afternoon—the rich aroma of her mum's cinnamon-apple cake baking in the oven, mingled with the earthy smell of rain tapping against the windowpanes. It was the smell of warmth, of comfort, of belonging.

This place remembers, Lina thought, her hand resting on one of the cool, silver stones. It wasn't just remembering the history of Vaelinya, the ancient trees or the forgotten rivers. It was remembering her.

She felt a pull toward the centre, a certainty that her path was leading her to the heart of it all. The winding corridors opened into a still, perfect circle. The air here was utterly silent, filled with a sense of profound peace and importance. And in the middle of the circle stood a figure.

It was her size, her shape, but it was hazy and indistinct, like a reflection seen through deep water, or a memory blurred by time. The figure slowly turned, and Lina gasped. It was her. But it was a version of her she hadn't seen in a long time. It was the Lina from her first year at the big school in the valley, the Lina who had tried so hard to be smaller, quieter, less… much. The Lina who had stopped talking about the songs she heard in the wind so the other kids wouldn't stare. The Lina who had copied the way others dressed, the way they spoke, the way they laughed, until she had forgotten the shape and sound of her own being.

The figure smiled—a tired, kind smile, full of a gentle sadness for all the effort it took to be someone else.

Lina's heart ached with a sudden, overwhelming empathy. She wasn't afraid of this ghost of her past. She felt a deep, protective love for

her. She stepped forward and reached out her hand. The figure mirrored the movement, its own hazy hand rising to meet hers.

They touched palms.

And in that moment, a current of pure understanding flowed between them. All the years of pretending, all the quiet apologies for being herself, all the fear of being seen—it all melted away like mist in the morning sun. The hazy figure didn't vanish or fight. It simply stepped forward and merged back into her, a soft, weightless homecoming. It was not gone, not erased, but held. The strength it had taken to survive that time was now hers. The memory of the pain was not a wound anymore, but a scar that told a story of resilience.

She was whole.

She turned, and the maze behind her had changed. The winding, confusing paths had shifted. The woven vines had rearranged themselves to form one single, clear, gently curving path leading directly back to the entrance. Because now, the maze knew her. And more importantly, she knew herself.

Later that night, her mum noticed the new stillness in Lina's eyes as she sat by the window.

"Are you okay, my love?" she asked softly.

Lina nodded, a slow, certain movement. "I found a piece of me I forgot I'd lost."

Her mum came closer. "Here in Vaelinya?"

Lina smiled, a genuine, untroubled smile that reached all the way to her eyes. "No. In a mirror made of paths."

Her mum didn't ask any more questions. She simply placed a hand on Lina's shoulder, a silent gesture of complete acceptance. Sometimes, the truest things, the most important journeys, didn't need explanation. They just needed to be seen.

Lina and the Song That Found Its Voice

Lina sat on her favourite mossy rock, the one shaped like a friendly bear. The stream beside her whispered secrets to the stones as it hurried along. In her heart, a melody fluttered like a trapped butterfly. She hummed, trying to let it out, but the tune came out wobbly and thin. It felt grey and washed out, like a drawing left in the rain. Frustrated, she sighed and tossed a pebble into the water, watching the ripples break the perfect reflection of the sky.

Suddenly, the water in front of her shimmered with a light of its own. Plink! A small fish, no bigger than her hand, leaped into the air. But this was no ordinary fish. Its scales weren't just silver; they glowed with the pearly pink of dawn, the deep violet of twilight, and the sparkly gold of a hidden treasure.

The fish opened its tiny mouth and sang a single, perfect note. It was as clear as glass and as warm as sunshine. It hung in the air for a moment before melting back into the sound of the stream. It was the most beautiful note Lina had ever heard, but it was all alone.

Lina hummed her own note, trying to match the fish's purity. Hers sounded shaky in comparison. The fish flicked its tail, which glittered with an emerald green, and sang a second note, a little higher this time. Timidly, Lina joined in. Her note, plus the fish's two notes, made a tiny, three-note melody. It wasn't much, but it was a start. A real smile, bright and wide, spread across Lina's face.

"Wow," she whispered. "Will you teach me?"

The fish, who she decided to call Finny, zipped through the water in a happy circle.

Day after day, Lina met Finny at the stream. Their friendship grew alongside their song. Lina told Finny stories about her life on land—about her wobbly bike, her favourite flavour of ice cream, and the pictures she drew. In return, Finny would show her the secrets of his world—the crayfish who hid under the flat rocks and the way the waterlilies closed their petals at dusk.

Their song grew with them. Some days it was a soft, slow lullaby. On other days, it was a fast, bubbling tune that made them both want to dance. It wasn't perfect. Sometimes Lina's voice cracked, and sometimes Finny swam off-key to chase a dragonfly. But it was theirs.

One afternoon, as they were trying a particularly cheerful part of the song, a grumpy voice rumbled from the bank. "That's not a song. It's just a bunch of mismatched noises."

Lina and Finny stopped. Peeking out from under a large, flat rock was a very old, very cranky-looking turtle. His shell was covered in green moss, and his eyes were narrowed into slits.

"A real song has rules," the turtle grumbled. "It should be smooth and proper. Yours is all over the place."

Lina's cheeks flushed red. The butterfly-melody in her heart suddenly felt like a heavy stone. Were they just making noise? Was their song silly? The turtle, who she learned was named Sheldon, retreated into his shell with a final, huffy sniff.

For the next few days, Lina didn't go to the stream. She tried to hum her song in her room, but Sheldon's words echoed in her ears. The tune felt wrong, clumsy, and embarrassing. The butterfly was still.

Her mum found her staring out her window. "You're quiet today, my little songbird," she said gently.

Lina just shrugged. "I don't think I have a song anymore."

Her mum didn't push. She just gave her a warm hug and said, "A song doesn't have to be perfect for everyone, Lina. It just has to be true for you."

The next morning, Lina missed Finny. She missed the whisper of the stream and the feel of the sun on her back. She missed their song, even if it was wobbly. Taking a deep breath, she walked back to her mossy rock.

Finny was waiting, darting back and forth anxiously. "I missed you," he sang in a series of sad, low notes.

Lina told him about Sheldon, and how his words had made her feel like her song wasn't good enough.

Finny listened, then swam right up to her. "Don't sing my notes, Lina," he chirped. "Don't sing a 'proper' song for the turtle. Sing about the turtle! Sing about how you feel. Sing your story."

Lina closed her eyes. She thought about the empty feeling, about Sheldon's grumpy face, and about her mum's warm hug. She took a breath, and this time, she didn't try to find a perfect note. She just hummed.

Then, words started to come. She sang about a girl by a stream, and a melody like a trapped butterfly. She sang about a magical fish with rainbow scales, and their funny, wobbly song. She even sang a verse about a grumpy turtle who thought he knew everything about music.

The song wasn't smooth or proper. It was a little sad, a little brave, a little funny, and completely, totally her own.

When she finished, she opened her eyes. The air felt still and peaceful. She looked over at Sheldon's rock. His head was poked out, and he was just watching her. He didn't grumble. He just blinked his ancient eyes slowly, then slipped silently back into the water.

Lina looked at Finny and grinned. She had done it. She had found her voice. The song wasn't in Finny's notes or in being perfect. It had been inside her all along. She just had to believe it was worth singing.

Later that night, as her mum tucked her into bed, she asked, "Did you find your song again?"

Lina nodded, her heart full and warm. "I did. It's not about being perfect or singing all the right notes. It's about finding your voice and telling your own story."

Mum smiled softly, her eyes full of pride. "That, my dear Lina, is the bravest and most beautiful song of all."

Glossary

The Mirror Pool
A still pool in the forest that shows not only your reflection, but sometimes what your heart is trying to tell you.

Bubble-lights
Small glowing orbs that float through the Vaelinyan forests. They hum gently when someone sings nearby.

Shimmer Lines
Ripples of light that run through the air, like invisible strings being plucked. Only children and the unmasked can see them clearly.

Chant
A song of power. Vaelinyans use chants to shape feelings into sound, and sound into action.

Mask
A way of hiding true feelings. In Vaelinya, masks can be taken off — but it takes courage.

Unmasking
When someone shows their real self, their song becomes stronger. This is how Lina learns to change her world.

Forest Lore
The deep knowledge of the woods: the old stories, the hidden paths, and the voices of animals.

The Flux
The current of sound and life that runs through Vaelinya. If you listen closely, you can feel it flowing beneath everything.

Vaeleshil
The "sung tongue" of Vaelinya. Children use it to talk to animals, rivers, and even the stars.

Companions
Friends Lina meets on her journeys — some human, some not — who share in her chants and her courage.

About the Author

Merrin W. Dream lives in York, where stories drift in with the morning fog and sometimes refuse to leave.

He writes about hidden worlds, brave children, and the secret songs that live in all of us. When he isn't writing, he's usually making music that sounds a little bit like forests dreaming, or building strange machines that hum, click, and whisper.

Merrin believes every child carries a spark of courage — and that the quietest voices often hold the strongest magic.

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Made with courage, song, and quiet magic in York.

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